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The Mistress of the Rural Manse

By Anna B. Taft

IN the change in modern conditions the minister has gradually slipped from the pedestal which was his customary location a century ago to the more noble service of a brother to his fellow men. The children no longer scamper away in awe when the parson approaches the front door. But there is one position of dignity and usefulness which still holds its old place among changing conditions at the present time—that is, the unquestionable leadership of the minister's wife in the country community.

Mistresses of the rural manse, although of varied type, have much in common. As an old man wisely remarked, "The minister always seems to secure for his wife the very best woman in the country." Often she is a college graduate, frequently she has beauty and personal charm, but, above all, in the majority of cases, she has a peculiar devotion to her husband's work and more successfully shares his life than the wife of the average man. If ever the history of the builders of country communities in America is recorded there will be written large two types of women; the rural school teacher and the wife of the country minister.

I know one woman who has served small country communities with a vision and devotion it would be hard to equal. By far the superior of her husband in ability and intellect, her life as a minister's wife for over twenty-five years had been spent in remote country sections, with never a family income to exceed six hundred dollars a year. She was the bulwark of her husband and the sympathetic adviser of two-thirds of the parish. She was not only a college graduate, but a skilled musician, a woman who would have graced any cultured circle, and whose heart hunger for congenial companionship was one of the most pathetic experiences I have ever known. All that saved her from insanity was the very real devotion of her husband and the service she constantly rendered to an ever new parish, as the limitations of her husband's ability necessitated constant moving. In spite of failure which seemed to be written large in his life, because of her help there was always left in every parish a wholesome and immortal influence for good.

I recall with loving memory another type of a country pastor's wife, a woman large hearted, perfectly healthy, and absolutely wholesome, having a very pronounced and natural distaste for the conventional round of a minister's wife's duties, as viewed by the church. She never could speak in public, absolutely refused to be President of the Ladies' Aid Society, and always felt that she held her husband back from his largest usefulness because she was so poorly fitted for the spectacular work of the church life, supposed to be her inherited share. Yet I found that this natural mother was the beloved saint of every poor family and whenever sickness and sorrow came into a home in all that large scattered country parish before the doctor was sent for, the minister's wife was there, and many a new life has been ushered into this world with no other aid but that of this noble, warm hearted woman. By the

sedate and orthodox church people she was sometimes misunderstood and criticized, but never by the poor. It was her healthy, wholesome, humorous sympathy that tided many a family over a tragic crisis. Her husband could bring a dozen people into his home for dinner and be perfectly sure of a hospitable welcome and an adequate meal. He himself reached a place of distinction largely because his home life was so sympathetically and sanely planned that he was left free to make the most of his own fine ability.

In another country parish the mistress of the rural manse was not only a college graduate, but a woman who had been a successful teacher in one of the higher institutions of learning. Having a daughter who needed an education, this woman supplemented her husband's slender income by teaching the little rural school that for once in its history, and only once, had a thoroughly excellent teacher. Of course the community did not appreciate it, and I vividly recall the scandalized parents who heartily objected to the time given to nature study. The feeling of another denomination in the community was so intense that after a couple of years the minister's wife gave up that effort. The interesting feature was the development of the children during that time: both morals and manners underwent an astonishing change and an interest in the country child's natural birthright had come to be cherished by many of the boys and girls. I remember one striking case in this connection. I met one day on the street a woman of the lowest type in the community, who had borne an exceedingly bad reputation in her younger days, and who was struggling for respectability. In her arms she carried a bunch of yellow ladies' slippers, very rare in that locality. I stopped and asked her about them, and she told me that her daughter Lucy had come to be so crazy about flowers that every Sunday she made her mother tramp back into the woods with her, hunting for new speci-

mens to take to the teacher. I have never seen this woman so tender and so human as she was that day.

One young college graduate, going into a country town with her husband for his first pastorate, remarked to a deacon's wife that she really did not know how to be a minister's wife, and this bright little old lady replied, out of her years of church experience, "Don't you be troubled, my Dear. There is not a woman in the church who cannot tell you how."

This same young woman after a few years of successful experience passed on the suggestion that there were only two fundamental needs in being a successful minister's wife: the first was to know how to treat your husband on a blue Monday and the second to appear to take all the advice that is given you.

In this as in other fields of service there is the pathetic story of the woman who failed, but the astonishing part is the tremendous successes that have been made against overwhelming odds. The country pastor's wife usually has every possible handicap in her struggle. She has a financial problem to meet the solution of which involves a miracle. She has the least of outside inspiration and the maximum of work, and yet with all this against her, nine times out of ten if her husband succeeds in his parish, it is by her ability as much as his own.